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Commission on the Status of Women
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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child

Statement submitted by American Psychological Association, Human Lactation Center, International Association for Women's Mental Health, International Association of Applied Psychology, International Association of Schools of Social Work, International Council of Psychologists, International Council of Women, International Federation of Business and Professional Women, International Federation of Social Workers, International Federation of Women Lawyers, International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, National Council of Women of the United States, Soroptimist International, World Association for Psychosocial Rehabilitation, World Council for Psychotherapy, World Federation for Mental Health and Zonta International, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

* E/CN.6/2007/1.

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Statement

We, the international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council and members of the NGO Committee on Mental Health, working under the auspices of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations (CONGO) in Consultative Status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, are committed to the promotion of mental health, psychological and societal well-being, the prevention and treatment of mental illness and emotional distress, and the improvement in the delivery and quality of mental health services through advocacy and education at the United Nations. Historically, mental health has been overlooked or minimized in discussions at the UN. The importance of maintaining full mental health for all people is recognized by the World Health Organization in its Constitution when it states that "health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity; the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition; and that the health of all peoples is fundamental to the attainment of peace and security and is dependent upon the fullest cooperation of individuals and States."

The NGO Committee on Mental Health and its members have worked diligently to call attention to the importance of gender and mental health in our advocacy at the United Nations. Women and men of all ages have a basic human right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. Fundamental to this goal is the implementation and vigorous enforcement of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Beijing Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women and other binding human rights treaties, conventions and covenants. However, inadequate attention has been given to mental health in the follow-up and subsequent implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and in the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG).

Discrimination and violence are risk factors that can impact the girl child's overall well-being throughout her life span. Research demonstrates an association between childhood exposure to adverse events such as physical abuse and sexual violence, and higher rates of short- and long-term physical and emotional problems. Victimization in childhood places women more at risk for future victimization. Female survivors of violence and discrimination are especially vulnerable to depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, low self-esteem, alcohol and drug abuse and suicidal behavior throughout their life span. They are at increased risk of living in poverty, developing HIV/AIDS, being exploited in work situations, being isolated and having shorter life spans. Furthermore, survivors of violence and discrimination who suffer from emotional distress and mental illness are more likely to place their children at risk, jeopardizing safety, health, nutrition and education, all critical factors in healthy development.

Eliminating all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child is a critical component in improving quality of life for women of all ages. Such eradication will occur only if gender equality is valued and public policy is changed so that discrimination and violence are no longer seen as normative. Positive efforts will reduce the burden of mental distress in society and enhance women's ability to create healthy families, as well as participate fully in social and economic development. Girls' full capabilities can be developed and utilized only if their psychosocial well-being at home, in their community, and in their society is valued. Empowerment takes place when girls are supported in

the development of self-confidence and self-worth and when they are taught a range of healthy coping strategies. Violence against girls is a human rights abuse. Girls must be given basic human rights, rather than be treated as objects or property. They must have the opportunity to attain higher levels of education and career training.

Girls and women must be provided full access to mental and physical health care that addresses their gender-specific needs. Health and mental health professionals must understand the impact of discrimination and violence on women. Discriminatory practices, based on gender stereotypes, cultural traditions, and stigma, which restrict girls and women's access to appropriate and affordable mental health care must be eliminated.

Recommended Action Priorities:

- In its deliberations, the Commission on the Status of Women should recognize the psychological impact of all forms of discrimination and violence directed at the girl child. In order to recognize the significance of mental health in the lives of girls and women, as a general practice throughout the CSW documents and agreed conclusions, the specific words "physical and mental health" should be used in place of the general term "health";

- Governments, the UN system, NGOs, and the private sector should integrate mental health as a priority issue into all levels of policy and program development. The promotion of psychosocial well being and the improvement of mental health care for the girl child, as well as women of all ages, must be included within a broader range of concerns, such as the elimination of discrimination and violence, as well as health, post-conflict/disaster reconstruction, sustainable development, the eradication of poverty, and human rights;

- Early identification and intervention in childhood emotional and behavioral problems are critical steps in creating healthy individuals through the life span.

- Research should be supported and developed to better understand the impact that violence and discrimination play in the development of girls throughout their lives.

- Enhanced mental health education and training, which is gender sensitive in nature, should be given to primary health care workers, social service professionals, educators, clergy and other healers. These workers must become aware of the role of risk factors such as violence and discrimination in the development of some mental disorders and respond appropriately;

- Discrimination against girls and women in mental and physical health care must be eliminated and appropriate mental health care for girls and women throughout the life span should be available. All measures should be taken to diminish, if not eradicate, the stigma attached to girls and women with psychiatric disabilities and other psychological problems.